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A Withered Lily in the House:

A Feminist Reading of *The House of Mirth*

屋中凋谢的百合花

—《欢乐之家》的女性主义解读

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Synopsis

Edith Wharton, a versatile and creative woman writer at the turn of the century, occupies a prominent place in the history of American literature. Most of her works are set in old New York, where Wharton herself was born and brought up, and expose women's situation in the cruel and irresponsible aristocratic society at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century. Her first important novel *The House of Mirth*, which marks the turning point in her writing career, establishes her position in American literary canon. Since its publication in 1905, it has drawn scores of critics' multiple comments and is popular among readers. Even today, it is still read by thousands of readers. The focus of this study is Lily Bart, the heroine in *The House of Mirth*. By drawing upon a feminist reading of the story which portrays Lily as the "nonsignificant Other" in the patriarchal society, this thesis explores Wharton's representation of women in that historical period.

This thesis is composed of three chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter One studies how Lily becomes "nonsignificant Other" in the patriarchal society. Since marriage is the only vocation available to her, Lily has to work hard to sell herself into a good marriage so that she can secure her place in the upper class. An analysis of her relationships with the male characters in the story shows her objectified identity as a woman. She is an artistic object to Selden, a changeable commodity to Rosedale and a sexual object to Trenor. Moreover, Lily is unable to defend herself against malicious gossips. Female discourse is silenced in the patriarchal society.

Chapter Two explores Lily's reaction to her subordination in the patriarchal society. Her ambivalent character determines her contradictory attitude towards it. On the one hand, she makes compromise with the society, making every effort to find a rich husband; on the other hand, she revolts against it by frequent rejection of marriage proposals. Disturbed by her true self, Lily refuses to sell herself and does not want to

conform to her fixed role as a hostess in the higher society.

Chapter Three examines Lily against the background of women's stereotyped images in the history of literature, namely, the Angel in the House and the Witch. Lily's complicated identity determines that she belongs to neither category. And she's not yet a New Woman. She can not have an independent existence in the society. With no place in the world, she has no choice but to die.

Through the exploration of Lily's complicated identity, the thesis aims to give a vivid picture of women's plight at that time. Though Lily can not escape the confining restrictions in the frivolous society, her revolt itself is significant and worth our attention.

Key words: Edith Wharton, nonsignificant Other, subordination, patriarchy

摘要

伊迪丝·沃顿是世纪之交一位多产而又富有创意的女作家，在美国文坛占有重要地位。她的大部分作品以她所熟悉的 19 世纪末 20 世纪初的老纽约为背景，描绘了当时上流社会女性的真实处境。她的成名作《欢乐之家》奠定了她在美国文学史上的地位。这部小说自从 1905 年出版以来，吸引了大量评论家对其进行多角度研究，受到广大读者的欢迎。本论文从女性主义文学批评的视角出发，通过分析莉莉如何在男权社会中成为“无足轻重的他者”，探讨了作者生活时代女性生活的现状。

本文由五部分组成，前言部分对全文作了总体综述，结论部分则对全文作了概括。主体部分共分三章。第一章研究了莉莉如何成为男权社会中“无足轻重的他者”。在当时社会，婚姻是上流社会妇女唯一的职业。为了在上流社会占有一席之地，莉莉不得不把找一个有钱的丈夫当成自己的生活目标。莉莉和故事中几位主要男性角色的关系进一步说明了她的物化身份。在塞尔登眼里，她是一件美丽的艺术品；在罗斯戴尔看来，她是一件可供买卖的商品；而对于粗俗的特里诺等人来说，莉莉只是一个性爱对象。面对恶毒的流言，莉莉毫无还击之力。女性话语权受到压抑。

第二章探讨了莉莉对其男权社会中的从属地位所作出的矛盾反应。她的双重性格决定了她的矛盾态度。一方面，她向社会妥协，努力找一个有钱人作丈夫；另一方面，她又厌恶这种空虚的生活，对社会强加在她身上的角色进行反抗。在追求物质享受的同时，她真实的自我不时影响她在关键时刻作出的决定。她精神方面的追求和她的道德感使她三番五次拒绝富商贵族的求婚。莉莉实际上并不愿意成为上流社会贵族家庭里的女主人。

第三章以西方文学中典型的女性形象为背景，探讨了莉莉是否符合任何一个典型形象。莉莉既不是温顺无私的“家庭天使”，也不是自私歹毒的“女巫”。但她又不具备成为“新女性”的条件。在这种社会中，莉莉无法过一种独立而又有意义的生活。莉莉在男权社会毫无立锥之地，最终只能走向死亡。

通过分析莉莉复杂的身份，本论文旨在呈现当时社会里女性的困境。虽然莉莉无法逃脱社会对女性的约束，但她的反抗本身颇具意义，值得人们关注。

关键词：伊迪丝·沃顿， 无足轻重的他者， 从属地位， 男权社会

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Introduction

Edith Wharton (1862-1937), an intellectual and prolific woman writer, occupies an important place in the history of American literature. As her biographer R. W. B. Lewis has declared in the preface to his book *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, “on the literary side, Edith Wharton was almost without peer in her American generation as a judge of achievement in fiction and poetry” (viii). She has provided to be an important bridge between American fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth century, shedding light on the past as well as showing the way forward. During her writing career of almost fifty years, Wharton has published more than forty books, including novels, short stories, nonfiction books as well as many articles, translations, introductions and reviews. Among these, she is best known for her novels, especially *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence* (for which she became the first woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize), and *Ethan Frome*. All these works have guaranteed Wharton’s preeminent place in American literature.

Born into the conservative, fashionable, and wealthy society of old New York, Edith belonged to the long-established socially prominent aristocratic family which constitutes the upper-class society. In this small and exclusive world, no occupation was available to women except for marriage. A girl’s aim was to become a hostess through the marriage to a gentleman in the upper class. However, little Edith preferred her father’s library to parties, and she had already begun to show her literary talent by writing poems and stories as a teenager. Besides, Edith traveled extensively in Europe throughout her childhood, which had a significant impact on her. She was deeply fascinated by the brilliant European history and culture, which nourished the little girl’s aesthetic taste for art and beauty. Actually, Edith traveled a lot in her lifetime. As Janet Goodwyn asserts, “travel both fed her imagination and restored her to a sense of self-possession” (2). Edith’s extensive reading and traveling had prepared her for a

great writer in her future life.

But it was a time when women were discouraged from artistic and intellectual endeavors. Accordingly, Edith Wharton was destined to become a struggling writer, who was torn between the fixed role of a hostess in the “house of mirth” and her desired role of an independent professional writer. Naturally she would convey in her works her confusion and anxiety as a professional woman writer in the transitional period. As Millicent Bell writes, “though she was no conscious a feminist, it was felt that she had expressed her own struggles in fiction that showed her clear understanding of what it had meant to be a woman” (13). Wolff also notes Wharton’s struggle and contribution. She put it in this way in the introduction to her book *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*:

One of the most magnificent members of that vanguard who initiated the modern epoch for women, Wharton did more than struggle for her own independence; she also used her fiction to scrutinize the problems that so many women face, and then she castigated the folly of a society that had relegated half of its members to a merely ornamental role. (xv)

In spite of the discouragement and suffocating atmosphere from the society, Wharton did bring her talents to the full swing. Her prolific works are remarkable for its craft and design, its insight into human nature, and its depiction of the complex interactions between individuals in their limited social world. In particular, they provide important insights into the predicament of women in New York high society at the time when the belief that women were sexual and social subclass was the norm of American home and social life.

Edith Wharton’s first important novel, *The House of Mirth*, is a typical instance which definitely shows her struggle. This novel gives an account of the attractive but penniless Lily Bart, aged 29, hunting for a rich husband to ensure her a life of material

comfort in the upper-class society. At the same time, Lily still has her spiritual pursuit. She could not imagine a marriage without love and trust. In her innermost heart, she despises the crude passion for money. She does not really want what she's been trying so hard to get. The two selves in her have always been in conflict and struggle with each other, and it is always the moral one that takes the upper hand. So Lily always follows the morally correct path in the corrupted world. However, the limited and cruel society combined with her own ambivalent character leads to her ultimate tragedy.

Edith Wharton is perceptive enough to find a significant theme from the flat and futile society. As Lewis writes:

The problem, as she recalled telling herself, "was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another.... The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys."

The answer, she declared in summary was to be the sensitive and vital heroine Lily Bart: and the story would be Lily's slow destruction by a grossly indifferent society. (150)

In Lily, Wharton realizes a culmination of her previous heroines—those who had been disappointed by inadequate men, trapped by limited social and intellectual circumstances and menaced by the larger forces of industrialization. In 1905, when *The House of Mirth* made its first appearance in America in a serial version in *Scribner's* and then a hard-book later that year, it immediately arrested the attention of a large number of readers. In November the number of copies had reached 80,000, and 140,000 copies were sold as the year drew to a close. Over the first two months of 1906, *The House of Mirth* was still the best-selling novel across the country (Lewis 151). Even today, it is still enjoyed by a large population of readers. The commercial success of this novel gained a literary place in the New York society for Edith Wharton.

It not only established her fame as an important American writer of her time but also marked her coming of age as a novelist.

After the publication of *The House of Mirth*, it received abundant critical reviews, both positive and negative, but mostly positive. Howard Sturgis poured out his exclamatory praise on Wharton: “How good! How good! It is to my mind the best thing you have done, so sustained, so closely woven, so inevitable, so living! I am lost in admiration” (qtd. in Lewis 152). Thomas Higginson said that this novel seemed to him “to stand at the head of all American fiction, save Hawthorne alone” (152). Mary Cholmondeley found herself “quite unable to put into words” her delight and admiration: “I would give anything to see as deep into life as you do, to know what you know about it, to write as you write about it” (152). *Outlook* regards it as a perfect literary work: “It justifies itself as a piece of expert workmanship. It would be difficult to find a carelessly written sentence, an obscure phrase, a halting paragraph, in the text of the book” (qtd. in Tuttleton 110). James MacArthur wrote that, “as a novelist she stands alone; there is none to compare her with, and her place is with the foremost exponents of cultivated American life in fiction” (119). Some critic even proclaimed it to be “one of the few novels which can claim to rank as literature” (130).

For all its huge success, *The House of Mirth* did not earn uniform approval in the press. Edith was attacked for having provided a warning about modern American society rather than a hope; for not having shown a means of escape for society’s victims; for having chosen a subject which was utterly unsuitable for conversation into literature; for not having introduced finer specimens of humanity, and for not exposing enough good in the characters (Lewis 154). Some critic thought that “what she says will not last, because it is simply the fashionable drawing of ephemeral types and still more ephemeral sentiments” (qtd. in Tuttleton 109). The critic attributed her ephemerality to the limit of her class.

A survey of critical responses to *The House of Mirth* from contemporary reviews to the most recent interpretation reveals that many critics pay attention to the issue of

women questions raised by the novel. They have concentrated on Wharton's concern for women's marginal position in society at the turn of the century. As Elizabeth Ammons comments, "It took her more than a decade to harness and fully understand her situation as she had come to see it; the waste, the crippling, the curtailment" (Ammons *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* 3). Bell gives her further elaboration:

[Wharton] had had to escape from the snares of the society in which she had been bred, a society that defined her as a woman in ways from which she had to break free by making herself a writer. The entrapment from which she had had to escape had been precisely defined also in *The House of Mirth* and *Summer*, which illustrated the conditions of female imprisonment both in the milieu of wealth and in the most limited of social circumstances. (10-11)

Obviously, these critics all focus on a social analysis of the female protagonist Lily Bart. What caused Lily's tragedy has been a great interest to them.

Some critics try to approach the novel from the structure and theme. Robert Brownell lauds the novel's "grand construction" (qtd. in Lewis 154). Carl Van Doren acknowledges its beauty of structure but finds the work "fading and crumbling" (qtd. in Killoran 27). Irving Howe examines the novel's structure perceptively, tracing Lily's literal step-by-step descent into social oblivion. Judith Fryer discerns the different places in the novel and suggests there is a descending line indicating the fall of Lily till her final death. Others raise the issue of economics. Wai-Chee Dimock is a notable example. He employs the language of the marketplace and tries to analyze the novel from a Marxist perspective. He argues that "as a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association, the marketplace is everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and invisible" (Dimock 123).

The present thesis aims to read Lily's tragic fate from a feminist perspective,

digging into the complicated social reason as well as Lily's complex character. It is composed of three chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion.

Chapter One focuses on Lily's identity as the "nonsignificant Other" in the patriarchal society. Firstly I'll lay the theoretical ground for my later analysis. Women, as a group, are treated as object instead of subject in the patriarchal culture. Lily, in particular, exemplifies this object identity under the male gaze and scrutiny. She is an artistic object in Selden's eyes, a changeable commodity in Rosedale's mind and a sexual object to Trenor. Besides, the patriarchal discourse is so strong that a female discourse is silenced under its power. As a victim in it, Lily is not able to speak for her self. She is defenseless under the patriarchal discourse. Through this discussion, Lily's identity as the "nonsignificant Other" is gradually presented to us.

Chapter Two tries to explore Lily's ambivalent character and how its dualistic nature influences Lily's vital choices in her life. On the one hand, Lily makes compromise with the society, making every effort to find a rich husband. The reasons behind it are her dependent economic situation and her education. On the other hand, Lily rebels against her destined fate to be an ornament. Disturbed by her true self, she gives up her chances to marry Dillworth and Percy Gryce; she refuses to marry Rosedale and Dorset by taking advantage of the adultery letters between Bertha and Selden. And she finally clears herself by returning the money to Gus Trenor. When she's with Selden, her true self usually pops out. Though Lily is regarded as a marketable commodity, she is ultimately not for sale.

Chapter Three continues to explore Lily's complex identity against the literary history of female characters. The stereotyped images of women in the patriarchal society are either the Angel in the House or the Witch. Since Lily is well aware of the double standards in the male-dominated society and she does fight against it, she is not the Angel in the House. Neither is she the Witch, for she's following the moral principles all the time, though not without perturbation. But she's not the New Woman either. Without a place in the world, Lily has no other choice but to die.

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